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AUTHOR Lynch, Daniel O.
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ABSTRACT

Access to higher education for minority students, involvement of the student at college, and achieving excellence are discussed. While lack of preparation limits access, avenues are potentially available to enable dropouts to gain credentials to enter college. In addition to student expectations, poverty can limit access because of not having capital or knowledge of options. Once in college, active involvement in goal setting, attending classes, talking to professors, and involvement in student activities are among the factors that produce students who achieve excellence in higher education. Recommendations to promote access, involvement, and excellence include: individual parent and student counseling at the high school that emphasizes options and benefits of college and means of financing a college education; recruitment of high school minority students by minority adults; dispersing grants in weekly installments to freshmen, biweekly installments to sophomores, monthly installments to juniors, and semester installments to seniors; systematic, personal contact between student and professors/counselors; nonclassroom interactions between faculty and students; allowing freshmen to have a small class where interaction is high; and making provision for students to systematically meet with advisers. (SW)

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ACCESS, INVOLVEMENT, AND EXCELLENCE:

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

DANIEL O. LYNCH, Ph.D.
Department of Educational Foundations
College of Education and Human Services
University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
Oshkosh, WI 54901

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ACCESS, INVOLVEMENT, AND EXCELLENCE: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Before minority students can succeed in college, they must gain access. Access can be denied in three different ways: student preparation; student, parent, peer, and school expectations; and poverty. Once these barriers are overcome, involvement of the student is vital to the student's staying in college and achieving excellence. The single most important item of involvement is student-faculty interaction. In this area can be seen the powerful influence of the individual teacher on the individual student: the Bill Cosby effect. Other helpful components of involvement are dormitory living, work in student government, class attendance, class effort, and honors programs. Finally, excellence is achieved through goal-setting; strong, persistent, and regularly measured involvement; careful progress monitoring; and systematic feedback to the student.

Access

The sequence of access, involvement, and excellence is virtually linear. Since excellence is the ultimate goal of education, the processes of access and involvement are subordinate to excellence. Astin (1985) has outlined much of what is needed for achieving excellence in higher education. His emphasis on talent development and an eclectic individualized approach to working with students have special relevance for minority students.

However, much needs to be done to lay the foundations for such excellence. In order for excellence to occur, the student

has to first get to higher education. This is the problem of access.

Access is typically limited at the college level by the admissions selections decisions made when potential students apply. The two best predictors of academic success in college are high school grades and college entrance exams. Generally these two indicators provide roughly equivalent information with high school grade point average (GPA) being the slightly better predictor. Both high school grades and college entrance exams are measures of student preparation for college. However, at best these predict success in college with less than 50% accuracy. The highest reported multiple-correlations of entrance exams and high school GPA with college GPA are in the vicinity of .65 which potentially can account for about 42 to 43 per cent of the variability of college GPA.

While lack of preparation limits access, it does not totally cut it off. Many avenues are potentially available for minority students convinced that they want higher education. As examples, the armed forces offer educaitonal opportunities to many, GED programs enable many former dropouts to gain credentials necessary for entering college, and institutions offering open admissions offer another route.

This leads to the issue of whether or not the individual pursues higher education. If the individual perceives higher education as either irrelevant or unattainable, it will not be pursued. Thus, at the individual level, access to higher education is already being limited by the time the student is in

junior high school. This is accomplished through negative self-expectations which are often derived from teachers, parents, and peers. These expectations result in negative choices in the junior and senior high school in terms of preparation for college. These negative choices range from dropping out of school to avoiding "college prep" courses to simply choosing not to work at succeeding in high school because school is seen as irrelevant.

Pettigrew (1964) long ago clearly documented the negative effects on measured intelligence and achievement that result from denying access to education. A vast body of literature of the 60's and 70's documents what has at times been called "The Pygmalion Effect" (Braun, 1976). This says that we tend to do and become what we are expected to do and become. The obverse of this coin is the deliberate suppression of educational access. In essence, we gain a portion of access from parents expecting us to achieve in school. We gain a portion of access from parents knowing what education can do for us. We gain similar portions of access from teachers and peers believing in us and finally we gain when we believe in ourselves. This means that children have to be taught from early childhood on what they can do and gain through educaton. Their parents also need to have much positive contact with schools so that they can develop positive educational expectations for their children.

Access is finally limited by poverty. Poverty comes in many forms. The two most important for future college students are lack of capital and knowledge.

A lack of capital with which to accomplish what one wants directly limits the options available to the minority student. Although the current large number of grants, loan, and scholarships programs seem to imply that everyone has access to college from a financial standpoint, the truth is that many perceive college as financially unattainable. They perceive the attainment of an education at prestigious institutions as impossible because of high reported tuition and board costs. Even the costs of less expensive schools are often seen as unconquerable both because of lack of finances and because of ignorance of financial help available.

The second type of poverty is lack of knowlege of options. Students coming from disadvantaged community, school, and parental backgrounds will not know about choices of college and major and will not know about finance sources.

Hearn and Loganecker (1985) report that over half of parents surveyed in 1980 knew nothing about either BEOG (Basic Educational Opportunity Grants, also called "Pell Grants" or Guaranteed Student Loans (GSL). This ignorance shows that the numbers of impoverished students attending college could be increased dramatically if students and parents were made aware of the opportunities and financial aids available. If the poor are targeted to receive grants and loans and if these are well advertised, this will produce the most dramatic increases in those attending college, especially from minority groups.

Probably grants are more effective than loans for the impoverished. Many do not see how they could ever pay back a

loan and so the loan is a psychological barrier rather than a help to access to higher education for many impoverished students.

The effects of low finances and poor guidance can be seen in a personal example. The student was confronted in 1958 with a choice between a local two-year extension program of the state university costing about $250 per year for tuition and books and a two-year county teachers' college program which cost $5 per year. He had little in the way of counsel since his parents had not completed high school. He did not have $250 nor did he know where to get it. He had $5 and that determined first his choice of college and later his choice of profession (after trying practice teaching as a college freshman, he decided he liked teaching).

Often students of minority background have no knowledge of what college is like, what the options are, what college can do for them, and have negative expectations on the personal benefits of college for them. This lack of knowledge results in many impoverished students schoosing not to go to college.

Involvement and Excellence

Adler (1982) advocates that all high school students in a democracy should receive the same general education to fairly prepare them to take advantage of higher education. There is no question that Adler's ideal is far from met. In grade school and high school most students from impoverished backgrounds receive radically different educations from that of students from advantaged backgrounds.

The March 1985 issue of Educational Leadership focuses on excellence in K-12 education. In many high schools and grade schools the common threads of programs producing excellence are goal setting, faculty and student involvement, careful measurement, and feedback of knowledge of outcomes. These threads characterize successful work with minority and majority students throughout history. Whether it is Booker T. Washington's work, W. E. B. DuBois' work, the Banneker Project in St. Louis, or the current RISE program in Milwaukee, the processes of goals, involvement, measurement, and feedback produce consistently good results.

The same is true for the minority student in higher education. active involvement in goal setting, active involvement in the processes of a university (attending classes, visiting and talking to one's professors, striving for class achievement, living in dormitories, holding a part-time work study job on campus, joining and holding offices in student groups), actively following up on measured progress (checking out test grades, making decisions about where and how to improve when signs of problems occur), all of these factors produce students who achieve excellence in higher education.

These factors exemplify what Astin (1985) calls the "talent development" approach to higher education. Involved students are less likely to drop out and more likely to show profit from the resources of higher education. Astin's (1975) earlier work on why students drop out focuses on correlations of retention with student involvement and achievement in college. His study was

based on group achievement and group factors. Although these factors sometimes do not work well for the individual, they give us a good idea of what to focus on in working with the individual student.

Although Astin (1985) emphasized an eclectic individualized approach to working with minority students, he does not say much about a major component of this individualized program. This is the impact of effective individual teachers and counselors on individual students. I prefer to call it "the Bill Cosby effect." I do so because one man has produced through entertainment a more positive image of blacks in American society than seems to have been produced by all the sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists put together. Similarly the individual teachers or counselors can on a lesser scale have dramatic effects on each student they work with. By carefully monitoring beginning students to see that they become involved in their university education, the individuals working with indiviudal students can have a big impact.

There are many ways that individuals could be monitored to see that they are getting involved in their university education. As an example, consider the dispersal of grant monies as a tool for monitoring student involvement. If freshmen receiving grants received them in weekly installments through a counseling office, students could be monitored on their growing involvement in their university educations.

Another aspect of the "Bill Cosby effect" is the fact that it conveys the idea of imitation. Albert Bandura and Jean Piaget

are psycholgists that have shown the strong pervasive influence of successful models on our individual behaviors. By emphasizing that professors, counselors, and other professionals are ordinary people who have achieved great things, students are given models of what they can do and become. Making individualized work with students an integral part of promotion and tenure decisions would shift higher education toward more concern for the individual student. Sending professor from minority backgrounds to communities and potential individual students with backgrounds similar to their own will help high school students begin to believe that they too can achieve.

One thing that seems to favor involvement is the keeping of interaction groups at the college level small in size. This means that deliberate provision must be made to keep some groups smaller so that indivudal freshmen students do not feel lost and alienated.

In conclusion, access, involvement, and excellence are closely related. There are large barriers to access and involvement that need to be removed if we are going to achieve excellence in educaiton of minority students.

Some specific recommendations are:

1. Each high school in the country should have a program of individual parent and student counseling emphasizing the options and benefits of college and the means of financing a college education. No parent should be ignorant of Pell Grants and GSL programs and, yet, the majority of impoverished parents are.
2. Minority faculty should especially be utilized to

recruit high school students from communities and backgrounds similar to theirs.

3. Grants should be dispersed in weekly installments to freshmen, biweekly installments to sophomores, monthly installments to juniors, and each semester to seniors to faciliate the transition to systematic budgeting and to prevent the tremendous loss of minority students at the freshman and sophomore levels of higher education.
4. Every college student should have systematic, personal contact with a minimum of one professor or counselor on a regular basis to capitalize on the impact of one-to-one interaction on the retention of and achievement of excellence by college students.
5. Faculty and students should eat together and share other activities in nonclassroom settings to increase student involvement.
6. Make provision so that all freshmen have the experience of taking a class which is small and the interaction level is high.
7. Make provision for all students (especially those with undeclared majors) to be systematically seeing advisors from the start of their higher education.
8. Enter Alexander Astin's (1985) major factors in student involvement into a simplified recording system so that every student's involvement is kept on record by an advisor personally responsible for mentoring that student.

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